In the October issue, we announced the After 5 Essay Contest, in which we asked readers to submit humorous first-person stories about their engineering-related experiences. We asked for 600-850 words on typed, double-spaced pages, to be sent to us at THE INSTITUTE *After 5 Essay Contest, 445 Hoes Lane, Piscataway, NJ, USA 08855-1331.*

We said we would publish the three funniest and best-written essays over the next few months and, by the way, offered absolutely no material compensation whatsoever. Even so, we've received many responses, more are coming in and it's not too late to send yours.

In the first wave was the following entry, a witty, stylish (and handsomely typed) manuscript. We thought it ably captured the working ethos of many a systems support job.

Yep. I said, 'That one.'

BY BRUCE TALBOTT

Back in the early 1980s, I was working for an international company whose product was a solids-modeling CAD/CAM/CAE system, with capabilities out the wazoo compared to others in its class and, especially, price range. Because standard keyboards were used at the display workstations, many of the functions for identifying the different elements of the model combined selection using both the 'puck' or stylus and a key on the keyboard (period to pick up a point, DEL to delete it, et cetera).

One day, our support engineer (call him "Bob") got a call from a very frustrated user (call him "Fred") — himself an engineer for over 20 years at a major government contractor — who had spent the better part of the morning trying to move one single point in his model, and he couldn't do it. He railed against our company, our product, his model, CAD/CAM in general, and his workstation for several minutes before explaining that, "... I place the puck on the d****d point and press the 'greater-than' key and *nothing happens*!"

Bob assured him that he would get to the heart of the trouble in no time, and after taking down the file and directory information so he could find the model — and promising that it was even higher than his number-one priority — he walked to our lab room and powered up the remote workstation to dial in to Fred's system.

Before dialing in, he called up a quick, simple model to make sure he could move the point using the "greater-than" key. Worked like a champ. Then he dialed in to Fred's system, found the directory and file in question, and started up Fred's CAD software. When the display screen turned blue (the software was active), he opened the model in question, examined its element list for corruption, ran through the list of points for glitches, then proceeded to move more than 20 points from place to place on the model ... failing never, and ending up with something that only the government would pay for ... but the "greater- than" key worked every time!

Sitting at the console, Bob called Fred with the sorrowful news that, "It worked for me. Are you sure you're pressing the right key? Over 20 different keys are used to modify model elements." Well, the response was as furious and incomprehensible as he expected, but being our best support engineer, Bob calmly sat and took Fred's abuse and let him run out his energy. After closing the model himself, Bob then asked Fred to call up the model on his workstation while they were on the phone.

After running workstation diagnostics checking the display, puck, digitizer tablet, keyboard and operating system and CAD software, Fred opened the model, described exactly which point he wanted to move, centered the cross-hairs on the point, and said, "Okay, Bob. I'm pressing the 'greater-than' key. Nothing happens. The d****d thing just sits there!"

Bob could hear Fred rapping his keyboard over and over again, trying to get his software to pick up the point. "Let's try another workstation," Bob suggested. After about five minutes on hold waiting for the other workstation to warm up and log in, Fred came back on the line.

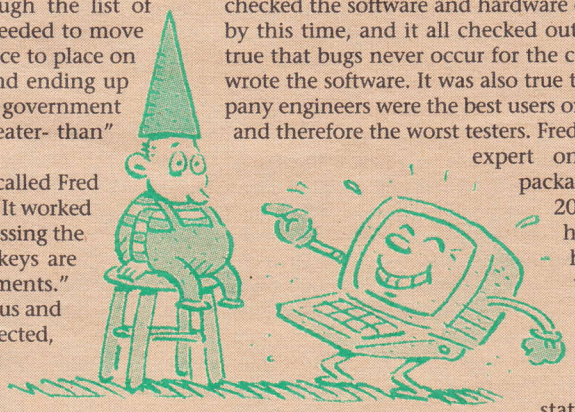
"Nothing!"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"This one's broke too!"

Tap. Tap. TAP. TAP.

Bob sat dumbfounded at this problem. He could move the point on his workstation using Fred's model and Fred's software, but Fred couldn't move it on any of their workstations. They had checked the software and hardware on both ends by this time, and it all checked out okay. It was true that bugs never occur for the company that wrote the software. It was also true that our company engineers were the best users of the software and therefore the worst testers. Fred had been an expert on electronics packaging for over 20 years. And, his company had just converted its engineers from drafting tables to CAD workstations. And ... Ha!



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With a smirk that he tried to keep out of his voice, Bob got back on the phone and said, "Try the other 'greater-than.'"

"The other one?"

"Yep. The one pointing to the right."

"Oh. Okay."

Tap.

There was silence for about 10 seconds.

"Thanks."

And Fred hung up.

Bruce Talbott is a systems consultant with more than 12 years experience in technical writing and programming. He lives in Baldwin, Md., USA "with my wife, dog and cat at the top of a 'killer driveway' (at least when it snows). Couldn't be happier."